

White Paper Report

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Voices in an Open-Source Democracy

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Project Citizen is the most widely adapted and implemented curricular program developed by the Center for Civic Education (the “Center”). Used in more than 60 countries, it has been widely recognized as a model community service program. Project Citizen equips students with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required for competent and responsible participation in the political life of their communities. It engages students in a series of structured, cooperative learning activities guided by teachers and adult volunteers.

Working in teams, students learn to interact with their government and community leaders through a five-step process that entails (1) identifying a public policy problem in their community, (2) gathering and evaluating information about the problem, (3) examining and evaluating alternative solutions, (4) selecting and developing a public policy proposal to address the problem, and (5) developing an action plan to bring their proposed solution to authorities with the power to implement it.

Responding to the need by teachers and students for a version of Project Citizen that could be used in an online environment, the Center developed Project Citizen into a digital web-based tool called ProCitizen (ProCitizen.org) and successfully pilot tested it among fifteen classrooms consisting of over 500 students in eight U.S. states and one foreign country (India).

After screening several hundred grade 5 to 12 Project Citizen teachers, fifteen teachers were selected to participate in the ProCitizen pilot. During the first three months of 2011, the participating teachers were matched and trained in the use of ProCitizen. Teachers and their classrooms were paired up so that they could work on projects as “partners,” collaborating remotely via the online tool by offering peer review and critical feedback in the form of blog entries and comments. The training was delivered via tutorial videos, wiki documents, email instructions, one on one sessions and by assigning a Center staff member to serve as support for each of the participants.

The pilot test involved 538 grade 5-12 male and female students from California, South Dakota, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, Maryland,

Kentucky, Utah, North Carolina and India. The students were selected to represent a cross section of communities, ranging from rural to urban and suburban. Participating classrooms were also chosen to represent a broad range in terms of access to Internet connected computers. While a few classrooms had access to computers at all times, the majority of classrooms had scheduled times during the week when computers were available for their use.

Classrooms began using the tool at different times during the spring 2011 term, based on their class schedules and the schedule of their partner classrooms. All participants were given a June 2011 deadline to complete their work and “publish” it on ProCitizen. Throughout this period, changes were continually made to the tool based on teacher and student user feedback and an ongoing analysis of user experience. Following their participation, teachers were individually debriefed and asked to complete a survey. The feedback gathered from participants was used to make further changes to the tool and the final ProCitizen reports generated by each classroom were made public in September 2011.

ProCitizen achieved its key objective, which was to offer an easily-accessible platform for Project Citizen students to showcase and preserve their work and ideas in a worldwide forum, providing greater public recognition of their efforts without requiring travel, shipping of project materials, or other expenditures. It did so by carefully designing and then developing a collaborative, self-publishing platform with integrated social media tools that is intuitive and easy to use, while wholly infused with the pedagogy of Project Citizen. All of the ProCitizen reports, once published, were available to be viewed by a much larger audience than had ever been possible before with non-digital public policy portfolios. The single most powerful indicator that ProCitizen has the potential for a long term impact in digital civic education is the desire that has been expressed by participants to continue using the tool with the eventual aim of supplementing their existing, more traditional Project Citizen curriculum.

This pilot test of ProCitizen, made possible by an NEH Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant, laid the foundation for an expansion of the ProCitizen website

and its digital toolkit. Accordingly, the Center intends to proceed with full implementation of ProCitizen in order to broaden and deepen its accessibility among grade 5-12 classrooms across the United States and throughout the world.